

# A SKETCH OF THE LIFE OF COE FINCH AUSTIN

BY SARAH AUSTIN DEMAREST

*Englewood, New Jersey*

Coe Finch Austin, the subject of this sketch, was born June 20, 1831, at Finchville, Orange County, New York. Grandparents on father's side were Abraham Austin, English descent, and Mehitable Campbell, Scotch, and on his mother's side, William Cortright and Jemima Huff, both Hollanders. He was the second of a family of ten children, born to James C. and Elizabeth Cortright Austin, thrifty farmers of that period. When he was quite young his parents moved to Greenville, N. Y., where the lad entered the public school. He made rapid progress in the fundamentals. A few years later the family moved to a fine farm near what was then called Brookfield, now Slate Hill, Orange County, N. Y., where his early life was spent, much the same as other boys, assisting on the farm during the summer, and attending public school in the winter, where he was generally at the head of his class and at the forefront in the various games played on the school grounds.

Early in life he manifested an interest in floriculture, and was his mother's constant companion as she cared for her flower garden (of which she was extremely fond), this same being often enriched by choice specimens which the boy gathered from neighbors of like tastes. Nor was he less interested in arboriculture, and the lawn of his paternal home was ornamented by trees of many varieties collected from forest and field, whose generous shade now gives pleasure and comfort to another generation occupying the homestead.

In character he was independent and aggressive, and impatient of restraint. When about eighteen years of age, being reprimanded by his father for some neglect of duty, he rebelled, and as a result was compelled to take the world for his parish; he went

through the full experience of the "Prodigal Son," returning after a few months, if not a sadder, a wiser boy. He partook of the fatted calf with evident relish, and there was joy in the household again, there being no elder brother in evidence to mar the occasion. This experience wrought a wholesome change in his character; he cut off some of his old companions, and started life on a new track. Soon after this he took up teaching and lecturing in neighboring schools during the winter months.

In the early 50's he entered Rankin's Classical School, at what is now Sussex, in Sussex County, New Jersey. Here he met a congenial spirit in the person of Mrs. Rankin, a botanist of some note, and to this chance meeting his choice of life work is undoubtedly due. He came from this school a working botanist. At first he took up the subject in its broadest sense, but after a time realized that the field was too broad to accomplish much in a lifetime, and becoming infatuated with microscopic revelations, he dropped all except mosses and lichens. In his search for specimens of them he was most indefatigable, letting no obstacles, however formidable, deter him from their pursuit. No distance was too great, no jungle too dense, no mountain too high or steep, no toil too great, to turn him aside in his eager search for new forms. Accompanied by an Indian he would spend whole days in the forests and field, from early morning till night, with no other food than berries and roots, which his knowledge of botany disclosed as of food value. He was heard to say that the botanists have sources of food supply that the world knows not of.

During the winter of 1856-57, in company with Edward Swift, of Marathon, N. Y., he toured New England, lecturing on electricity and chemistry, with apparatus to illustrate, and it was said by those competent to judge that his brilliant experiments were the most striking of their kind, and rarely, if ever, surpassed by any one. He was heard to say that if man ever learned to control electricity of sufficient power they would see horseless carriages and the steam engine would be succeeded by electric engines.

Later, in 1857, he accepted a position as school teacher at Tappan, N. Y. There he met Hannah Campbell, daughter of David P. Campbell, a farmer, living on the Alpine Road, about one quarter mile from Closter, N. J., to whom he was married,

May 11, 1858. In the fall of that year he went to Dennisville, Cape May County, N. J., taught school for a year, and it was while there that he met in his wanderings through woods and marshes Charles F. Parker, of Philadelphia. In the early days of their acquaintance the latter often visited him, and it was he who assisted him in the purchase of his microscope.

Miss Warwick, a resident of Dennisville at that time, told the writer a few years ago that she had vivid recollection of the lectures delivered in her town by Professor Austin. He drew large gatherings of people from the surrounding country, for the subjects were new to them, and his experiments were always very successful, which made the lectures attractive.

In the middle of June, 1859, he, with his family, returned to Closter. About this time he became acquainted with Dr. Torrey, and through Torrey's influence became curator of the Columbia College Herbarium. He moved, in the autumn of 1861, to an apartment in the college. During this period he devoted himself to intensive study; his power of concentration was remarkably great. He remained at the college until after the spring of 1863, when he again returned to Closter, again taking up lecturing, going through the country for miles around, traveling with a little pony and a carry-all wagon.

In 1865 and 1866 he taught school at Demarest, N. J., one mile south of Closter, and spent his noon hours in nearby woods, gathering mosses and other plants, which he often showed to his pupils, pointing out and explaining the peculiarities of each. Boys of neighboring villages were always on the lookout for him, and, when spied by one, soon there would be a group of them around him, for his pockets always contained something to interest them. Those were days when children were not noticed by grown-ups, as they are to-day, and the attention he paid to them was very acceptable.

As a teacher he was fond of children, and if they could not keep up with their classes and showed a willingness to do so, he would help them after school hours, but he had no patience with those who could be termed lazy.

His last lectures were delivered at the Englewood Institute in the winter of 1871-72. His interest in botany increased as time

went on, possibly due to his finding new species of mosses, hepatics, and lichens. Some time in the latter half of the 60's a piece of swampy meadowland, lying due west of what was then the Reformed Church Parsonage of Closter, had been cultivated and seeded down by a neighbor living a little distance away. One day the pastor's little daughter came rushing to her father excitedly, saying a man was stealing Freddie's turnips. Rev. Hammond, for that was the pastor's name, went out to see who the intruder was. He saw him on his knees, scraping earth with his hands. As he came near he found it to be the botanist, who joyously exclaimed, "I have found a new lichen." He walked with his friend up to the parsonage, telling about his discovery as they went. When he reached there he was bubbling over, and he asked Miss Isabelle, who had caught some of his enthusiasm, what he should name it and she replied, "Austini." It was this pastor who assisted him in his study of classical Latin, but he had to study out botanical terms without assistance. He maintained a large correspondence with scientists in all parts of America and Europe, his knowledge of Latin being a benefit to him, but desirous of corresponding with a noted German botanist, and being ignorant of the language, he laid aside everything until he had so far mastered it that he was able to communicate with this person.

Many specimens were sent to him to be named, from foreign countries as well as the United States and Canada, in which he was so intensely interested that with his beloved microscope he would work until two or three o'clock in the morning, seeming oblivious of the passing of time, God giving him to see in the humble mosses and lichens which the world tramples under foot oceans of beauty and interest. He seemed to have a contempt for the riches of this world, his gold mine being the dense forest or the rugged mountain, rich with his beloved mosses.

I recently received a letter from Dr. J. J. Haring, of Toledo, Ohio, formerly of Tenafly, N. J., an old friend of his, still living, from which I quote the following: "I remember many conversations with your father in his best years—upon botanical matters, especially in relation to that of mosses, of which he was a close and enthusiastic student, devoting to them most of his time, of years not a few. I remember his pride in having the opportunity

of correspondence with leading authorities on mosses, and his exchange of rare specimens of them. Especially do I recollect his enthusiastic announcement that he had discovered varieties unknown to writers and students in his particular line. . . . Had his life been spared for some years longer, and could he have been more favorably situated financially, it is my belief that as an authority on mosses and lichens he would have been surpassed by only a few distinguished specialists in his chosen department of botanical work and study."

Many positions of profit were offered him, but all were rejected for fear that their acceptance would interfere with his favorite study, ignoring the fact that his family would be benefited thereby, yet no one who knew him would think of calling him selfish, for his knowledge of any subject was theirs for the asking.

He made the most of every day allotted to him, but not always, in fact seldom, for his own benefit. He was kind-hearted, and always ready to give a helping hand to those who needed his assistance, invariably without remuneration. He was happy, and fond of his family, proud of the progress made by his children in their studies, never refusing, no matter how busy, to help them over difficult problems.

He accepted his circumstances uncomplainingly, for he was so infatuated with the love of nature in all forms that if he could study unmolested he knew no cold, heat, fatigue, or hunger. Family needs, trials, and troubles he left for others to care for. He was of a cheerful disposition, and could always find something to smile about, often on account of the clumsy way some one tried to do a piece of work, for he could mend a plow, or repair a watch, as well as any one.

During the last decade of his life he would leave his studies and make excursions into the country on foot, in search of specimens. To illustrate his intrepidity and fearlessness on these excursions, the following incident may be given: While visiting a brother at Haverstraw, N. Y., he expressed a desire to ascend the "High Tor," a rocky and precipitous eminence of the mountain, setting back landward near the town. This peak rises to a height of about 800 feet. Its front is rocky and rises in a succession of sheer faces of from 25 to 50 feet. A rugged path called the "Deer

Path" affords a comparatively easy means of ascent, the difficult places being bordered by scant shrubbery, which being grasped by the hands enabled one to ascend. Here and there on the way up specimens were added to his shoulder-bag. On reaching the top, and after viewing the magnificent scenery, he surprised his brother by handing him the specimens, with instructions to meet him at a certain point at the base of the mountain, saying that he would descend the face of the peak. The brother was horrified at the suggestion and tried to dissuade him from so hazardous an undertaking, but failed. Arriving at the point of meeting agreed upon, no sound of his approach could be heard, and no answer was made to his brother's vociferous call. An approaching thunder-storm added to the brother's apprehension of disaster. Suddenly the botanist appeared, loaded with specimens, and a smile on his face which was intended to convey a rebuke for faint-heartedness.

In 1870 he began the task of mounting in book form his *Musci Appalachiani*. This work was carefully and artistically done. One who did not see the work being done could not possibly form any idea of the amount of time and painstaking labor required to arrange each set.

At this time Closter was rapidly building up, and owners of new homes were desirous of beautifying their grounds with shade-trees, but met with much disappointment because so many of the trees died. He, being successful in planting trees and shrubs, was asked by a neighbor if he would take up the work. He felt sure of success, and in a modest way began the work, selecting his trees from woods of the farmers on the outskirts of Closter, until the demand was so great that he started a nursery. The beautiful shade-trees stand to-day as monuments to his memory. It was he who brought pond lilies to this region and planted them wherever he found suitable place for them. No matter how hard he worked during the day he was always ready to handle mosses in the evening.

He took several trips in the interest of botany. He went to Ohio to see Mr. Sullivant, and to the White Mountains, his last trip being to Florida. There in a rowboat, with a negro oarsman, he ransacked the banks of southern rivers and morasses, looking for new treasures. He enjoyed remarkably good health until the

southern trip, for there he contracted a sort of malarial fever, which undermined his health, and he seldom visited his familiar haunts on the Palisades after that.

The last time he went there was to meet a prominent man at Col. Miles's. He wore a new suit, just completed by his wife, and much against her wishes, for she knew his failing, but he promised her he would not go botanizing, simply going for a call. On his return he was tired, and stopped at his father-in-law's to rest, looking more like a tramp than the gentleman of a few hours before, and behold he had cut the lining of his coat and used his coat for a bag to carry mosses—he had found such beautiful specimens that he could not pass them by!

Although for several months he gradually grew weaker, he did not give up his work entirely, for he realized he was near the end of his life's journey, and was anxious to complete the arranging of several sets of his supplement to *Musci Appalachiani*, so that they could be disposed of profitably by his family. He continued until he was getting the numbers mixed because his mind could not endure the strain, laying the work aside, unfinished, three days before his death.

On March 18, 1880, he was called from the scenes of toil and study. His parents, then residing in Ridgebury, two miles from Slate Hill, being too feeble to come to Closter, appropriate funeral services were held in the Ridgebury Methodist Church, and interment was in the family plot in the cemetery adjoining the church. He left a widow and six children, one son and five daughters, the youngest being then seven years old. His widow was called to her rest December 12, 1916. The six children are still living. They are all married.

Sarah Elizabeth, wife of Abraham Demarest, Englewood, N. J.

David C. Austin, of Westfield, N. J.

Annie, wife of Walter G. Warner, of New York.

Kate, wife of Henry Scott, of New York.

Marietta, wife of Harry L. V. Warner, of Bloomfield, N. J.

Ella, wife of Edward W. Dorey, of New York.

Large quantities of mosses continued to come to his address for fully two years, the senders not knowing of his decease. Five years later, the minister who officiated at his funeral, while travel-

ing on pony-back over the Rockies, alighting to take a rest, found a man gathering mosses. As he was in a measure interested in them he opened up a conversation with him in regard to what he was collecting, and much to his surprise he found him to be an amateur, who expected to send his unfamiliar varieties to Professor Austin of Closter, N. J., to be named. Our friend told him there was no Professor Austin in Closter, whereupon he insisted he had the name correct and that our friend was mistaken, until told that such was the fact, as our friend had officiated at the funeral.

Mrs. Isabelle Hammond Demarest, of Closter, N. J., whose name has been mentioned before, a neighbor of Professor Austin's, who had known him since the early 60's, caught his spirit, and after reading this sketch insisted that the writer was not nearly enthusiastic enough in her portrayal of her father's life. While that may be true, the respect and veneration which the writer has for her father's memory will not permit her to record a single statement which she does not know to be based upon solid fact. His unostentatious character has been to a certain extent reproduced in his daughter, and so she has recorded merely the ground-work. Let the laudatory trimming be added by some other hand!